

Delivers Remarks Honoring the Contributions of Immigrant Soldiers and Veterans of the War in Iraq

Washington, DC - This evening, Congressman Charles Gonzalez lead members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus during a special order session of Congress. The hour long session gave participating members an opportunity to recognize the contributions of immigrant soldiers and veterans of the war in Iraq.

Below are his embargoed remarks, as prepared for delivery.

Madame Speaker, I rise today to speak on a subject that has been conspicuously absent from legislative debate over immigration reform. Over the length of this debate, proponents of the "enforcement only" approach have repeatedly referred to immigrants as dangers to the American economy, our society and our culture.

A number of my colleagues argue that immigrants take away jobs from American citizens and that immigration has a net effect of shrinking the middle class. They suspect immigrants generally of bringing crime, drugs, and even terrorism into our country. And they suggest that immigrants weaken our patriotic culture by failing to assimilate into American society.

Fear characterizes all of these sentiments. Fear of change-both economic and social. Fear of new contributions to the fabric of American culture. Generally, a fear of the "other."

Fear can be a powerful and dangerous force. It can motivate hate. It can impede toleration and understanding. Fear can paralyze us with paranoia and blind us to reasoned and logical argument. Fear in the media and in the halls of Congress has distorted the image of immigrants in this country.

Much as sensationalist TV programming can make us believe that our communities are more dangerous than they really are, sensationalist characterizations of the immigrant population based on anecdotal examples or predictions of "worst-case scenarios" can falsely lead us to negative, reactionary and unfounded opinions about immigrants.

I can no longer tolerate the blanket generalizations used to cast our nation's immigrant population in a universally negative and threatening light. They do not reflect reality. They misrepresent our national interest with respect to immigration. They polarize the public and prevent reasoned and productive dialogue. And they promote a legislative climate that distracts us from our national interest in reforming our broken immigration policies.

We can all agree that we need comprehensive immigration reform. But we must also come to an understanding that demonizing immigrants will not get us there.

Ostracizing immigrants in this country with venomous and inapt rhetoric will not move us toward the integration of newcomers into our economy, promotion of safe streets for our children to play in, or assimilation of the immigrant population. It can only delay the time when the immigrant population becomes a fully functional and participatory component of our society. It can only set back the day when we can guarantee the security of our borders and documentation of all individuals that cross them.

Like my colleagues that emphasize tough border enforcement, I too believe in reform that provides security for our country and documentation for all individuals that enter American territory. I think that we speak with a common voice regarding our homeland security goals. Our approaches to talking about the issue of immigration, and methods for solving the problem may differ, but we share common goals in promoting our national and economic security.

Debate over approaches to immigration reform is a topic for responsible legislative discourse.

Today, my colleagues and I wish to speak on a related topic, about some of the immigrants that are the subjects of our larger debate over immigration. The immigrants we want to talk about are not threats to our national security, or to our economy, or to our people. They, in fact, have demonstrated their solidarity with our nation. Unquestionably, they wish to contribute to our security and our economy. And the individuals we speak of cannot be considered separately as friend or foe to the American people, because they demonstrate daily that they are, in fact, Americans in their own right.

The individuals we rise to speak of today are the tens of thousands of brave men and women in the American armed forces that were not born in the United States. Like the courageous sons and daughters born and raised in my home state of Texas and throughout this country, these individuals have taken an oath to defend the United States of America, with their very lives if necessary. These immigrant soldiers may differ from their native born brothers and sisters in terms of the location of their birth, and even in their citizenship status. However, on the battlefield they are united by a common purpose.

Among soldiers in the U.S. military, there is no distinction made between those born in Texas, in the Philippines, or in Mexico. All take an oath, all assume risks, all make sacrifices, all are worthy of honor and distinction, and we thank them all equally for giving so generously that we, living in communities across this great country, may do so peacefully.

Madam Speaker, the first member of the United States armed forces killed in Iraq was not a citizen of this country.

Marine Lance Corporal Jose Antonio Gutierrez, like most Guatemalans, was born into poverty. He was orphaned in 1983 at age 9 and taken in by Casa Alianza, or Covenant House, in Guatemala City. The causes and dates of his parents' deaths are unknown to us now. For the next decade, LCPL Gutierrez led a tragic and tumultuous life, bouncing from the orphanage to the street and back again.

His adulthood, like his childhood, was characterized by hardship. He worked for a time in a Maquila plant, a sweat shop, operating a sewing machine. Even as a single person, making ends meet at such a job is difficult.

In early 1997, LCPL Gutierrez made a decision to travel to the United States to seek a better life. He arrived in California an undocumented immigrant. He attended North High School in Torrance, California.

In March 2002, LCPL Gutierrez enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps because he wanted to become a citizen of this great country. He was assigned to the second Battalion of the Expeditionary Forces of the US Marine's First Division.

LCPL Gutierrez was killed a year later, close to the city of Umm al Qasr in southern Iraq, on March 21, 2003. He was 28 years old. This man's sacrifice, the first life laid down in the sands of Iraq on behalf of the United States, is testament to the belief of immigrants in the promise of America. It is a symbol of patriotism, of commitment to defending a dream that we all share.

In May of last year, according to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, nearly 69,000 foreign born soldiers, 5 % of the military, were on active duty.

Can it be said of these immigrants that they are a threat to our national security? Clearly no; they ensure our national security. Can it be said that these immigrants threaten American workers? Clearly no; they ensure that American workers can go to their jobs in peace. Can it be said of these immigrants that they threaten the safety of our communities with drugs or violence. Again, clearly no; they are pillars of their communities when home, and defenders of their communities when abroad.

Why then, have so many in this debate over immigration missed the contributions these brave individuals make to the peace, prosperity, and security of our country? Do examples of immigrants' courage and sacrifice occur as seldom as those acts of violence some use to characterize an entire immigrant population? Is their heroic service anecdotal in the larger discussion about the contributions of immigrants to our society?

Once again, I hardly think so. One of every twenty soldiers in the U.S. military was born outside this country. Two members of an average platoon immigrated to this country and now serve us all honorably.

What more can we ask of these young people? Lance Corporal Gutierrez not only gave his life for his adopted country, he was the first to do so in this war. What more can we ask of immigrant parents when they have already given up their brave sons and daughters for the defense of an adopted homeland?

Madame Speaker, these immigrant soldiers are among the most prominent faces of immigration today, but they are not uncharacteristic of the larger immigrant population. They represent the honest work ethic, the ambition, and the patriotism characteristic of immigrants of all national origins and across all eras. They represent the frontier spirit that built our country and continues to bring the best the world has to offer here, to the United States, in pursuit of our common American dream.

Specialist Rodrigo Gonzalez-Garza of San Antonio, TX, was killed February 25, 2003, when the Black Hawk helicopter in which he was riding crashed during a night mission 30 miles north of the Kuwaiti border. He was 26.

Specialist Gonzalez-Garza was born in Sabinas Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico and was brought to the United States by his parents as an infant. He graduated from San Antonio's Fox Tech High School in 1996 and joined the army in 1998.

Spc. Gonzalez-Garza, like many other casualties of the Iraq War, did not die an American citizen. He died defending the United States, and pursuing a dream to become a citizen of this country. Only in death was this goal finally achieved. After he gave his life, Spc. Gonzalez-Garza was awarded posthumous citizenship. Spc. Gonzalez-Garza's sacrifice on our behalf is remarkable, and perhaps only matched by the contribution his parents have made to the United States.

Spc. Gonzalez-Garza's parents Ramiro and Orelia Gonzalez have three other sons in the military: Staff Sergeant Ramiro Gonzalez, Private Roland Gonzalez and Private Ricardo Gonzalez, Rodrigo's twin. One would find it difficult to find a family more devoted to the United States and our American way of life than the Gonzalez family. Spc. Gonzalez-Garza has given his life. His three brothers continue to defend our security and liberty with their lives. And the parents-they have given not one, not two, but all four of their sons to the service of their adopted country.

I would like to share some of the sentiments posted on FallenHeroesMemorial.com, a website devoted to the memory of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan during operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, about Sgt. Gonzalez-Garza.

The following are postings from fellow Americans who apparently did not know Spc. Gonzalez-Garza, but wished to express their gratitude for his service.

From Grayslake, IL:

"Thank you Rodrigo Gonzalez-Garza, you will not be forgotten. Your bravery goes beyond words. I want to express my deepest gratitude for your sacrifice. To the family and friends, my prayers and deep condolences in your loss. May God strengthen you from knowing that fellow Americans and people around the world care about you and grieve with you in your loss. God bless you all.-signed, A very appreciative fellow American.

From Wells, NV:

"To the family and friends of Spc. Rodrigo Gonzalez-Garza: May God's grace be with you during your time of grief. Please know that our thoughts and prayers are with you and we feel your loss and share in your sorrow. Bless Rodrigo for the sacrifice he has made to make a better life for the rest of us."

From Montrose, MN:

"Thanks for stepping forward when America needed you. To the family-Thank you for your contribution to our liberty and freedom. I'm sorry for your tremendous loss."

From Houston, TX:

"Specialist Gonzalez-Garza, goodbye soldier and thank you. You are my Hero."

I want to join these individuals, and to share my gratitude for Spc. Rodrigo Gonzalez-Garza's service and sacrifice.

Thank you, Spc. Gonzalez-Garza. Thank you also to Ramiro and Orelia for the service of your sons. You emigrated from Mexico, but you have devoted yourselves and your family to the United States of America. And like the individuals I have just quoted, Spc. Gonzalez-Garza, I too want to thank you, as a fellow American.